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**“The European Social Model (ESM) and
cultural diversity in Europe”**

Jean-Claude Barbier

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The European Social Model (ESM) and cultural diversity in Europe

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“The European Social Model (ESM) and cultural diversity in Europe”

Inaugural lecture as *adjungeret professor*

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University of Aalborg

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Introduction

In the past forty years a voluminous body of literature has been published to analyse the phenomena of European integration, Europeanization, convergence and diversity of all kinds of institutions and social practices across states that are members of the European Union. A long journey was made from the first studies, like for instance Ernst Haas's who, in 1968, revisited his 1958 theory of 'spill-over', after General de Gaulle, to him, had changed the conditions of European integration, because he was "a true nineteenth nationalist" (1968: xviii). Spill-over, Haas thought in 1958, in the first edition of his book, was inevitable: it was, he wrote, "unlikely that the General Common Market can avoid a species of political federalism in order to function as an economic organ" (1968: 317). Why "political federalism" has still to really emerge in the present conditions remains to be explained and we will deal with only one small angle to this question, namely, the special case of the 'social dimension' of European integration. We will contend here that, despite the immense change brought to Europe by the 50 years of initiatives started by the 1957 Treaty of Rome, despite the crucial aspect of 'negative integration' (Scharpf 2000) and the increasing homogenisation of elites through their cross-national socialisation, 'political cultures' still matter to such an important degree that they preclude, and probably will preclude for a long time, the very possibility of actually implementing the basic process and practices that 'solidarity' demands, under the now classical institutionalised forms of 'social protection' (Barbier and Théret 2004).

Because the amount of scholarship about these themes is immense, it is perhaps not useless to stress some of our preferences in terms of paradigms and theories. As a sociologist fully aware of the fact that many disciplines can contribute to the study of this object, we tend to think that it is indispensable to relate present empirical work to classical foundations. In this respect, our main inspiration comes from Max Weber for a number of reasons. Firstly because he gives us an immensely enriching body of comparative facts, methods and theories in his comparison of the world religions. Secondly because he places at the heart of his work the notion of meaningful activity (*sinnhaftes Handeln*). And thirdly because he takes a clear standpoint on the question of the relationship between ideas (or, in other terms, culture) and interests. For this reason, I would like to recall, at the beginning of this lecture, his famous quote about human action : "*Interessen, materielle und ideelle, nicht; Ideen, beherrschen unmittelbar das Handeln der Menschen aber; die ‚Weltbilder‘ welche durch Ideen geschaffen wurden, haben sehr oft als Weichensteller die Bahnen bestimmt, in denen die Dynamik der Interessen das Handeln fortbewegte*" (Weber 1996: 349-350)¹. Quoting Weber, I wish to stress here the crucial importance of the cognitive aspect of the developments that are taking place in the process of EU integration. We may take here for granted the fact that, increasingly, EU policies share a characteristic stressed by many researchers (Jobert 2003; Muller and Surel 1998: 100; Muller 2000: 204-205): they contribute to the *de-coupling*² of the sphere of policies from the sphere of politics. More and more, at the EU level, cognitive and normative frameworks are established, which have an important cognitive influence on the way na-

¹ I quote here from Weber's French translation of the *Sociology of Religions*, translated by J.P. Grossein, who quotes the original German wording. The German text is drawn from the complete works (MWG – Max Weber Gesamtaufgabe, I 19:101).

² 'De-coupling' is a general feature of the entire EU-level system, as Mény (2004) notes "*Dans la pratique, le découplage entre débats, programmes électoraux et politique européenne est presque total, à la fois en raison de la faiblesse – de l'inexistence diraient certains – d'une opinion publique européenne, de la faiblesse du Parlement et de sa médiocre influence sur une partie de l'exécutif européen, de l'absence de lien entre l'organe conseil des ministres et l'électorat*".

tional programmes and policies are designed. And here Max Weber's statement is essential inasmuch as it points to the fact that the various interests engaged in the making of EU politics and policies mainly fight with one another through "ideas". We will show that, at a certain level of generality, these frameworks and ideas are indeed 'Europeanized', while at the same time, differences and closure amongst polities are maintained.

The ESM, a concept and a brief history

The mobilising ESM versus the existing ESM

The very notion of an ESM is difficult to grasp because it is intricately linked to a complex international political discourse. Even so, we will argue here that, given certain precautions, the concept can be used as a broad analytical tool. The concept is in fact at the same time normative and analytical.

Let's first turn to the normative aspect: the '*mobilising ESM*', i.e. the ESM as a political resource for mobilisation for actors. The expression 'European Social Model' was first used while Jacques Delors was president of the Commission during an era when competition between the United States and Europe triggered debates among international and especially European elites (Jepsen and Serrano Pascual 2005). The steps leading to the introduction of the European Employment Strategy (EES) in 1997, the adoption of the 'Lisbon Strategy' in 2000 and the later introduction of various OMCs (Open methods of coordination) in social policy and other fields, were influenced both by the debate over an ESM and by competition with the 'US model'.³ The ESM, more or less explicitly, implies a set of assumptions as to how the European economy and the European 'social dimension' are interlinked and operate in relation to one another. The notion of an ESM bears similarities, in this respect, to the German concept of *soziale Marktwirtschaft* (social market economy) which was introduced as an economic doctrine by German economists such as A. Müller-Armack after the second world war; it served, at one and the same time, as a cornerstone of the political project of successive post-war German governments as well as a reference to a specific economic model within and beyond Germany. The normative ESM would probably also bear closer affinities with the so-called 'coordinated market economy' (Hall and Soskice 2001) or Rhineland model. In this context it should also be emphasized that the draft Constitution of the EU contained only a reference to the 'social market economy,' in addition to the objective of achieving 'a high level of social protection' (article I-3), but did not mention the ESM.

Secondly, in order to be able to contrast the concept of an ESM analytically with other 'models,' especially the US one, we have to identify the defining characteristics of an '*existing ESM*'. For this purpose, we assume an ESM with two 'layers,' consisting of an aggregate of the existing national systems of social protection in the 27 member states, plus an EU-level component. Social protection is thereby defined broadly, including traditional sets of institutions and policies pertaining to the welfare systems such as health, pensions, education and training (Barbier and Théret 2004). These systems also include various sets of actors. Their institutions comprise labour law and employment rights, as well as the various norms governing employment relationships (including informal ones). National systems of industrial relations would of course figure in the overall 'system of social protection' as defined here, though they might, alternatively, be considered as a separate element.

In the comparative literature, 'models' (and countries) are commonly compared according to their institutions, actors, systems, or even 'societal coherence.' And a standard research approach is the effort to establish causal relations between, on one hand, institutions and systems and, on the other, 'outcomes.' In accordance with such an approach, the two-layered ESM can be objectified by indicators such as security of income, jobs, poverty, inequality,

³ Interviews with European Commission officials confirm the supposition that, when devising the EES, DG Employment (ex-DG V) explicitly compared key features of the 'ESM' to the 'US model'. See Barbier and Sylla 2002; Barbier 2004a.

demographic patterns, employment and activity rates, etc. In such a way it would be possible systematically to compare the US 'model' with the 'ESM.'

Thirdly, in order to understand national social protection systems fully it is necessary to establish their structural links with economic policies. For the ESM, which is characterised by a mix of national systems and a quasi-federal layer of institutions and policies, this implies taking into account the complex interaction of four types of policies (Barbier 2004a: 36-42): (i) EU-level economic and monetary policies; (ii) national economic policies; (iii) EU-level social policies, and (iv) national social policies. With respect to the comparison of the 'existing ESM' with the 'US model' this leads to the question: does the set of empirical relationships that exist between the four types of policies have any similarity with the US model? Such a question is of significant importance in light of the fact that a great deal of the comparative literature on social policies in Europe tends to support the idea that the very existence of the (normatively-defined) ESM is threatened by the economic and monetary policies enforced at the EU level, often labelled 'neo-liberal,' albeit without precise definition of the distinguishing features of this identity.⁴

Finally, there is the proposal to assume two conflicting ESMs, one promoted by 'economically oriented actors' and the other by 'socially oriented actors' (Guillén and Palier 2004). The above reflection raises two questions that an analytical perspective on the ESM cannot evade, viz., are national systems currently Europeanized, and are they converging? Both questions are implicit in any comparison of the European and the US models. It is important to note, however, that the indication of common features among 15 or 27 EU member states in no way implies that they are currently converging, because convergence is a process. Therefore we have to be extremely attentive to the content of a potential convergence. We will use a method similar to the one we used in our research on the various OMCs, viz., by distinguishing between *procedural* and *substantial* changes resulting from OMC's (Barbier 2005a). Furthermore, 'Europeanization' needs to be analysed empirically, and the question 'Europeanization of what?' has to be addressed (Radaelli 2000). Finally, Europeanization as a process can be seen as consisting of many possible channels contributing to the emergence, consolidation, or even dissolution, of an existing ESM. In summary, the research task can be defined as identifying an existing (and the least normative) ESM. In this lecture we will have to assess the extent to which a substantive influence is attributable, in particular, to soft law mechanisms (basically the OMCs).

A brief survey of the history of Social Europe

How can one explain that 'Social Europe' (here understood as the EU-level layer of the existing ESM, i.e. the comprehensive set of EU-level social policies⁵) provides a clear example of superficial homogenisation and persisting diversity? To address the question, we will first present a brief survey of the main milestones in its history, which led to the important turn of 2004-2005, and an eventual near collapse of the very 'social dimension' of EU integration.

⁴ In contrast, Fitoussi and Saraceno (2004: 2) define the 'neo-liberal doctrine' in positive terms as setting two main tasks for policy: reducing the market distortion of government intervention and using the resources thus freed for structural reforms to increase competition. By contrast with the mainstream vague use of the term, for a substantial analysis of the distinctive and national-specific dimensions of the neo-liberal project and reforms, see Campbell and Pedersen (2001).

⁵ It would be rather easy to show that the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is in fact one of the key social policies at the EU-level; educational policy and culture policy, on the contrary, occupy only a marginal space in this set of EU policies.

Explanations for this development, especially those presented by the Commission, fail to take into account deeply rooted causes, i.e., the fact that genuine ‘social protection issues’ cannot *yet* be decided outside closed polities that are marked by distinct national political cultures which frame the legitimacy of social policies.

Nevertheless, when one looks at the amount of administrative and political activities organised by the Commission in the ‘social domain’ since the beginnings of the European Communities and the Treaty of Rome, they appear extensive. But, conscious of the risk of oversimplifying, we contend that these policies⁶ can be easily summed up and presented in three stages (ignoring here the possible impact of the business cycles). (1) A first long period stretches from 1957 to the early 1990’s; (2) a real innovative period was then started and practically ended up in 2005; (3) the present situation will probably remain as the third stage for a very long time.

Ferrera (2005) and Leibfried and Pierson (1995) have largely documented the first stage. The main elements of this period are the following. Firstly, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) has gradually established the legal bases of its influence in national social protection systems; this influence has grown as a consequence of the consistent implementation of the principles of free movement (labour, capital, goods and services) (see also Schmidt 2006: 70-74). Additionally, member states – sometimes with great reluctance – have gradually accepted that the EU’s legal order prevails over the national legal orders. Over the whole period, this form of homogenisation (‘Europeanisation’) via the EU legal order was practically ignored in national public debates; the obligations and constraints that result from it for national systems can be seen as pertaining to ‘negative integration’. Secondly, the main domain where European influence was exerted consisted of the coordination of social security systems for migrant workers and employees – a very small group indeed so far. The main legal instrument used was Regulation 1408/71: in a nutshell, its objective was to open up national systems in such a way that workers (and their families) could be eligible to benefits even when they worked in another member state: for instance, family benefits were paid to the family of a Portuguese worker employed in France by way of a mechanism coordinating family funds in France and Portugal⁷. This regulation was recently updated (Regulation 883/2004). Thirdly, the ‘hard-law’ influence of the EU-level over national legislation has been at its highest in the domain of health and safety at work on one hand and in the domain of equal opportunities for men and women (and equality and anti-discrimination in general) on the other. However, apart from this variegated influence upon national systems, it can be argued that their essential substance and regulation, as well as the social justice and solidarity principles upon which they have rested were consistently left to the national competence during the period.

A second period – which in a way could be seen as the ‘golden age’ of Social Europe – started in the early 1990’s. Yet, this golden age never meant more than coordinating ideas, cognitive frameworks and processes more closely. For our present concern, its main distinctive characteristic is the introduction of the Open Methods of Coordination (OMC) in social policy. The initial intellectual origin of these methods is not always sufficiently stressed: there happened a convergence of efforts and initiatives between the Delors group (the publication of the White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment in 1993) and some Scandi-

⁶ Essentially the corresponding politics involved have remained intergovernmental ones over the whole period because of the repartition of competences, social policy and politics remaining basically national matters.

⁷ I refer here to the matter discussed in the Judgement of the Court “Pinna vs Caisse d’allocations familiales de la Savoie” in 1989 (March, 2, 1989), a judgement which started a controversy and an updating of the Regulation 1408.

navian politicians and experts (Johansson 1999; Barbier 2004a: 45-46) that fed the Intergovernmental Conference in 1995-96 with innovative ideas and proposals, with the help of Luxembourg's Prime Minister Juncker and the Party of European Socialists (PES). The Scandinavian « Joint Committee of the Nordic social democratic labour movement » (SAMAK) was very active, with Allan Larsson, the former Swedish Finance Minister and later Director of the Commission's DG Employment, as a key player. As Larsson told in an interview: *"I met the leader of the Danish Social-democratic Party, who shared my concerns about the focus on financial matters. We discussed and agreed to take a Nordic initiative in SAMAK (...). SAMAK agreed in May 1992 to set up a committee on employment in Europe and I was appointed chairman of the group (...). In June 1993, at the EU Summit in Copenhagen, Jacques Delors made employment an issue on the agenda of the European Council and was given a mandate to prepare a White Paper on employment for the EU Summit in Brussels in December 1993. The leaders of the Socialist parties met in September in Lisbon; the Swedish party leader, Ingvar Carlsson was a driving force at this meeting and the Swedish party was asked to take responsibility for a group, which should prepare an employment strategy to be launched before the elections to the European Parliament in 1994. Mr Carlsson asked me to chair the group. We started working in September, I met all party leaders during the 1993 autumn, either in Brussels or in their capitals, and we had a series of meetings with the whole group in Brussels. We had a first version of our report ready for the meeting of the party leaders on the eve of the Brussels summit".* In line with this initiative, later to be known as the « European Employment Initiative (EEI) », the majority in the PES decided not to lobby for including employment as one of the 'Maastricht criteria', but instead to promote a European Employment Strategy. As Larsson said: *"At that time, end of 1994-beginning of 1995, there was a European debate on employment and the EMU. Those who would see a strong emphasis on employment proposed the inclusion of employment among the convergence criteria. When we analysed these arguments we found that it would be too weak a role for employment. Employment would have been reduced to an obstacle in the run up to the EMU, an equivalent to fiscal deficit, etc. We came to the conclusion that employment had to have a much stronger role; it had to be a project in its own right, which is the reason why we drafted the paper on an Employment Union. Employment had to be an overarching objective for economic policy, not a convergence criterion, not a sector policy among other policies, not a 'residual' in economic policy. That was the main reason for the initiative. Another reason was that there was no room for any redrafting of the Maastricht Treaty at that time".* For A. Larsson and his allies, an 'EmpU (Employment Union)' was deemed to be *"the expression of a common European commitment to give a central role to the battle against unemployment, and thereby to honour the Treaty commitment to a high level of employment"* (quoted in Barbier 2004a).

Hence the European Employment Strategy, eventually launched in 1997, at the special Luxembourg summit and enshrined in the new Amsterdam Treaty, was the first and most prominent form of a new coordinative mechanism: more co-ordinations followed afterwards and the OMC proper was canonically defined only at the Lisbon summit, in 2000. It constituted a remarkable step forward to try and reconcile social policy and economic constraints, in the Scandinavian spirit. However, it never went beyond the establishment of common guidelines. The procedural success of the mechanism and its spreading over to ever new policy areas (social inclusion, pensions, healthcare, etc.) in the following years never challenged the core and

legal reality that, if structural funds and the Common agricultural policy (CAP) are considered apart⁸, social policy is *and will remain national*.

The actual substance of OMCs: ‘de-politicized’ co-ordination

What exactly are OMCs, these strange creatures first hatched in Lisbon? How do they affect national politics and policies? To what extent did they bring substantive progress for the European social dimension?

Despite their history of about 10 years, they are still a ‘new’ brand of policies which are difficult to grasp from a sociological point of view. They lack many of the characteristics of traditional policies. Among all OMCs, the EES has remained the most elaborate and sophisticated and it is reasonable to take it as a sort of ‘ideal-type’ (Barbier 2005a). Since its first introduction (1997)⁹, it has been consistently implemented and it was significantly reformed in 2003 and, more profoundly again in 2005. At this second date, previous national action plans for employment (NAPes) were transmogrified: merged with other co-ordinations (most notably the Broad Economic Policy Guidelines – BEPGs) they finally emerged as new avatars, the National Reform Programmes (NRP). On the basis of their analysis, the Council and the Commission draft a joint annual report to the European Council. Over a three-year cycle, the EES has three overarching objectives: full employment, quality and productivity at work, cohesion and an inclusive labour market.

OMCs can be easily seen – although of course falsely – as ‘technical’ or ‘a-political’. Yet it is sure that they are, to a certain extent, *de-politicized*. In the French case, for instance, the procedural success of the EES, among a very small group of elite actors, was linked to the fact that they adopted a *common de-politicized discourse* (Barbier 2004a; 2004b). More broadly, Radaelli (2003) has very adequately noted that a tension was present at the very core of the EES, (and we may add of the OMCs in general), because as “there is no attempt to forge a European vision of capitalism” (ibid.: 20), it is all the more necessary to “avoid politicization” (ibid.: 21).

OMCs as cognitive instruments and their use in *élite* power games

Seen as the typical OMC, the cognitive dimension of the EES is almost self-evident. This is probably why it is so easy to misunderstand it as ‘symbolic’ policy in Edelman’s (1964) sense: however, whilst there certainly is a distinct symbolic dimension to it, the EES cannot be seen as *mainly* symbolic. Three aspects are important to stress here. The EES first gave birth to an extensive array of administrative and political activities: some of them at the EU level, some at the national level. This increase of exchanges has fostered a ‘Europeanized’ socialisation of elites (politicians, experts, academics, trade unionists, etc.). Secondly the EES is a political discourse (a highly jargonised mix of sociological, political and economic statements) about the ways and means to devise and manage the developments of labour markets and social protection. But, thirdly, the EES would remain a pure fiction (a pure symbol, in a

⁸ Structural funds form only a tiny proportion of national expenditure. CAP features as the biggest item in the EU-Budget and it has been conspicuously controversial for the last 15 years, despite the truce signed at the Berlin summit in 1999.

⁹ The very label ‘OMC’ was introduced later, in 2000, at the Lisbon summit. Before the OMC was canonically defined, it had precedents: the BEPG, that the EC Treaty (former article 103-2) organised, can be considered as another OMC. Similar coordination procedures have existed, but certainly less structured, for instance the 1994 OECD Job Strategy.

way) were it not explicitly grafted onto national policies, which are embedded in their existing systems of social protection.

Based on the legal provisions of the EC Treaty, which bind all member states (Title VIII), new administrative and political activities were started, but introducing the EES has entailed no significant altering in funding¹⁰. Other actors – like for instance social partners' organisations – also have had to devote new resources to be able to participate in these activities. However, the 'gist' of the EES lies in the political discourse it disseminates and in the crafting of this discourse by a small group of elite actors. This discourse is a description of policy goals in matters of employment and related areas and its nature is often ambiguous; enunciating an economic strategy for European labour markets may indeed pass at the same time for an apparently *technical* economic statement *and* a normative policy declaration¹¹. Although it very deftly tries to avoid any strong wording implying the support of certain partisan values, the standard political discourse is very appropriately consistent with what has come to be the mainstream policy-mix in Europe (Fitoussi and Saraceno 2004). This discourse is anything but neutral, anything but technical and it conveys a specific normative choice among other possible policies, including macroeconomic policies. However, as the EES discourse *exemplifies a consensus* which has been shared by all governments since the 'paradigm' change in economic policy (Hall 1993; Jobert 1994), it has been possible to present it as a relatively *depoliticized discourse*, irrespective of the partisan colours of the national governments in place.

The eventual EES discourse emerges as the product of a complex web of networks, forums and arenas with no direct contact with national politics (de la Porte and Pochet 2003). Its *precise wording* is the object of intense interaction, negotiations, horse trading, and compromises¹². The *main arena* includes the Committees (Employment Committee, Economic Policy Committee, the Economic and Financial Committee); the Council; and two Commission's DGs (Economic and Financial affairs and Employment and Social Affairs). The Permanent Representatives of the member states also play a role in the final decisions as well as the semester's Presidency. The Commission's Presidency is involved in the decision, especially inasmuch as arbitration has to occur between the diverging discourses the two DGs fight for¹³. Increasingly, the European Parliament has also been involved in the discussion. As na-

¹⁰ Although the subsequent introduction of a co-ordination with the European Social Fund (objective 3) has formally entailed an explicit "streamlining" of both policy objectives.

¹¹ Interestingly, at a moment where 'social initiatives' are scarce at the EU-level, the Commission has seized upon the 'flexicurity' theme and tried precisely to steer it as a technical matter; as a consequence, controversies have increased about the actual political project that is behind the apparently neutral "flexicurity nexus" (Barbier 2007c). For instance the Party of European Socialists in the EU Parliament wrote an alternative blueprint for the flexicurity strategy which stresses the importance of the consultation of social partners and of the existence of what they call "improved coordination of macro-economic policies and public spending in support of smart growth" (PES internal paper, 'Towards common principles of flexicurity', September 2007).

¹² The essential material analysed here stems from a long-term programme of comparative studies of systems of social protection and employment policies. Apart from documentary analysis, this approach to the EES and the other OMCs has entailed a programme of interviews stretching over the years 2001 to 2004. Officials were first met in France and a handful at DG Employment in 2001. A more comprehensive programme of interviews was conducted in 2002-2003. It has involved meeting 53 persons (24 in France; 12 in the Commission; 9 persons participating in the Employment Committee; representatives of UNICE and ETUC). Participant observation was also sometimes possible in meetings. Among the 53 persons met, 10 nationalities were represented (29 French, 6 Germans, 4 Britons, 4 Belgians, 2 Italians, 3 Swedes, 1 Finn, 1 Dane, 1 from Spain and 1 from Rumania).

¹³ It is widely known that the structural opposition between the national ministries of finance and social ministries has its counterpart at EU level, with the opposition between both DGs.

tional actors prevail, the arena functions as a place where actors try to influence the final version of the discourse in such a way as they feel will suit their interests best for the various uses they can make of it. In any case, these specialized elite politics are practised far away from mainstream national politics and at a distance from direct democratic legitimating¹⁴.

From de-politicization to re-politicization: back to real politics

However, when used in national politics, the de-politicized discourse will be swiftly *re-politicized*, and this process reveals how determining the national level of ‘Social Europe’ has been and will remain in the future. Let’s take a few instances of this politicization at national level.

In 2003, the French minister of employment Fillon argued that the Wim Kok taskforce report was contradicting the previous French Socialist government’s policy¹⁵. During the same period, the EES was also used as a *lever* to achieve a particular arbitration of conflicts within national politics: this was for instance the case of the French minister Aubry achieving victory over the Budget minister who was forced to accept significant additional funding of the French Employment Service in 1998. The French department for gender equality was accordingly able to use the formulation of the EES to make this normative orientation much more prominent on the government’s agenda. More broadly, all governments pursue the goal of writing an EES discourse that supports their own national choices: for instance, the UK government – particularly privileged by the fact that EU-level policies are first worded in English – was instrumental in setting the ‘make work pay’ rationale as a key objective on the EES agenda. Because employment and labour market policies are part of the core national legitimizing processes, the minimum requirement for member states’ representatives is that the discourse eventually adopted by the Employment Committee and decided over by the Employment and social affairs Council (after various consultation procedures) will allow them to format and insert their national policies into the framework. Although more marginally, other actors – we have mainly empirically documented the case of the French trade unions – are also able to use the discourse as a resource to further their national goals¹⁶.

Another example can be taken in Denmark: Danish actors also use the EU arena to further their aims and ideas. For instance, before domestic audiences, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the current Prime minister has implied that he was the inventor of the term ‘flexicurity’, a prominent social issue in 2006-2007. He did so on the 21st of November, 2004, at his party’s congress, claiming that he innovated in putting both terms together. This is a far-fetched claim indeed (Bredgaard *et al.* 2005; Madsen 2006; Barbier 2007c), but the example demonstrates how keenly the apparently de-politicized EES discourse is re-politicized when readapted within national politics.

¹⁴ To use V. Schmidt’s categories, this elite politics pertain to democracy “for the people” (2006: 5).

¹⁵ Typically, during a CDSEI meeting with social partners (CDSEI was the permanent working group’s French name), the minister declared: « *J’observe, et c’est pour moi une leçon essentielle, qu’il ne s’agit pas de savoir si on est libéral ou social-démocrate, si on est de gauche de droite ou du centre. Il s’agit de savoir si telle ou telle mesure est efficace pour augmenter le taux d’activité et réduire le chômage* » (January, 22nd, 2004 – see the site www.travail.gouv.fr). A little earlier the British Chancellor Gordon Brown similarly tried to ‘capture’ the Wim Kok report, stating that the main UK policy instruments for labour market flexibility was endorsed by the report (see his speech at the Wall Street Journal conference in November 2003).

¹⁶ Trade union representatives interviewed sometimes declare that the existence of new forums linked to the EES consultation at the national level are able to influence, although on a limited scale, the way national debates are conducted and their agendas formulated.

Observing the production of the EES discourse is akin to analysing how a representation of the state of the world will be fought for and finally agreed upon by certain actors¹⁷. Conflicts can be better interpreted in terms of inter-governmental processes, where national interests are defended, irrespective of the particular 'scientific' or 'communicative' discourse involved (Jacobson 2003). In opposition to the expectation of 'neutrality' (for a de-politicized process), convincing evidence abounds of the fact that the formulations and indicators of the OMCs are the object of compromises that originate in the vindication of member states' interests and in different national approaches and political agendas. Their positions' rationale is explained both by their objectives of (i) keeping the level of national autonomy of decision making that they deem adequate, and (ii) negotiating texts that are compatible with policies at home. Whilst the general employment policy discourse can certainly be seen as 'Europeanized', this is certainly mere 'surface' Europeanization (Büchs and Friedrich 2005). And this 'surface' Europeanization, because it occurs in a sphere distinct from national politics, has an inevitably limited impact on national social policies.

Real decisions about real policies are taken in national polities and highly politicized

Actually, the EES does not *mainly* consist of a complex web of political and administrative activities, and a discourse resulting from a controversial and process between governments pushing forward their conflicting views: it eventually relies upon the existence of *national policies*, which are legitimated on the domestic scene, through the great variety of institutions and political cultures. Would actual programmes and policies not exist in member states, the EES would be completely deprived of any regulative or legitimising potential power. Not only in legal terms (the competencies conferred to the EU by the EC Treaty), but also in political terms (the political legitimising process of policies within national polities), national programmes and policies, however cognitively and normatively coordinated, have remained and will remain a determining variable.

Many instances of the crucial and distinct processes of the national building of the legitimacy of social reforms can be taken in the recent years: for instance, the labour market reform (1993-94) and the reform of the *efterløn* (voluntary early retirement) in Denmark (2005); the 35-hour a week legislation in France (1998) and the 2003 pension reform in the public sector, keeping 'pay as you go' as a main instrument; the long process of the Hartz reforms in Germany (2001-2004); the continuous welfare reform in the UK, initiated by the New Labour government from 1997. These are only some examples that show that for each reform, in spite of the EU-level coordination and alongside it, specific national features and institutions prevailed, in a context of domestic politicization and partisanship. Reforms will remain legitimised and contested within national polities, even if the OMCs provide national governments with power and cognitive resources. This explains why, despite the reluctance of many member states to accept an increased role for the Commission, the EES has kept functioning rather successfully, in terms of the states' expectations, in its first period of existence till 2002.

¹⁷ The EES production process is not without echoing a very ancient function of government, which was first clearly enunciated by Confucius, who contended, in his "Analects" that once denominations were rightly devised, the actual world itself would also be in order. Etienne has noted that in China, the cohesion of the human group is based on language reform. Confucius advocates the rectification of denominations (*zheng ming*). « L'homme de bien n'utilise des Noms que s'ils impliquent un discours cohérent et ne tient de discours que s'il débouche sur la pratique. Voilà pourquoi l'homme de bien est si prudent dans ce qu'il dit » (*Entretiens de Confucius*, translation by Anne Cheng, Seuil, Points, Paris, 1981, p. 102-103). Incidentally, from the point of view of the methods of observation, researchers watching EU institutions have certainly much in common with 'China watchers' who used to observe China from Hong Kong.

However, the fundamental limitation of the EES and other OMCs was to be attained rather rapidly, and both could hardly be seen as vehicles to building a future substantive and genuine 'Social Europe', on top of an additional cognitive mechanism of coordination between states. Conflicts of values and politicization were bound to emerge, some way or another.

Apart from insisting on the potential the OMCs have for the future, M. Ferrera (2005: 240-244) also rightly stressed the importance of the Charter of Fundamental Rights for the future development of social policy in Europe. However, as was again demonstrated in 2007, at the Council of Heads of States in June that adopted a new 'reform Treaty', the exact legal status of this document is still very fragile¹⁸. As Ferrera (2005: 249) rightly notes, it would be naïve to see both instruments as "unequivocal signs of the activation of the 'incremental social supranationalism' scenario".

Three turning points in 2004-2005

Indeed, the last period of our stylised survey of the 'social dimension' in Europe started in 2004. Three changes must be mentioned here. The first was a clear shift of the balance between the 'economic' and the 'social' actors within the Commission, and within the policy arenas deciding over this balance. This is exemplified by the change of tune and substance that characterizes the second 'Kok report'. The first one, "Jobs, Jobs, Jobs", published in 2003, was positioned in continuity with the 2003 reform of the EES. However, the second one "Facing the Challenge", published in autumn 2004 marked a shift towards the clear affirmation of the necessity of structural reforms in the context of orthodox economic supply-side policies. The second important change introduced in 2004 was the effective accession of ten new member states following the completion of the enlargement process. Unlike the previous enlargements, countries significantly poorer and with very different social protection and legal institutions became full members, immediately making the existing coordination processes of the various OMCs more complicated and tricky. The profound divide between two groups of member states with regard to the 'social dimension' was illustrated by the publication by a group of countries (Belgium, France, Luxemburg, Hungary, Italy, Greece, Spain, Bulgaria and Cyprus) of a manifesto in favour of new social measures, issued in February 2007, while the declaration was sharply opposed by countries like Poland and the Czech Republic. Last but not least, of course, the third event prompting the near collapse of 'social Europe' was the havoc sparked off by the failure of referendums in the Netherlands and France, for the adoption of the project for a Constitutional Treaty in 2005. As we will see later, this latter event had to do, explicitly in France, and also in the Netherlands, although less directly, with the national boundaries of social protection systems and the fear of a negative influence of the supra-national level upon these systems.

All in all, the painful building of the first two stages of the 'social dimension' in the EU finally ended in a state of 'near collapse', and we are left with the difficult task of explaining the deep roots of this situation, in the hope that some lessons for research /but also action could emerge from this understanding. It is certainly not incidental that, for the first time in 2005, on a large and explicit scale, measures pertaining to this 'social dimension' were directly present and debated within the mainstream processes of politics and elections in the Netherlands and France. For instance, in France, the so-called 'Bolkenstein' service directive was largely used as a pretext by opponents of the project for a Constitutional Treaty to support their contention that the European integration was gradually destroying public services

¹⁸ The UK government successfully negotiated to exempt Britain from the application of the Charter, because it said it was incompatible with the common law tradition.

and social protection. To use Ferrera's word (2005: 253), one might consider that the evolution since the failure of the referendums is kind of "gloomy". However, whatever the "gloomy" consequences that stemmed out of the refusals, a new kind of national democratic debate was indeed started, albeit distorted and difficult, which focused on precise social issues. It is also certainly true that EU-level debates concerning economic and social policies often tend to have an influence on the way national debates are conducted: cognitive framing through 'common European language' (namely Europeanized English) often happens, as is the case for instance of the recently introduced theme of 'flexicurity'. Yet, if flexicurity is discussed in a growing circle of places, the substance of the debates held in its name in Germany are German, in Denmark Danish, and in France, French.

Very different forms of legitimacy for EU-level social policy

Before addressing the question as to why the EU-level part of social Europe has remained relatively marginal so far, it is important to stress that EU policies are submitted to a legitimization process which is very different from the national ones. Distinguishing between various types of legitimacy (*by* the people, *of* the people, *with* and *for* the people, 2006: 5; 243-245), Vivien Schmidt has suggested that, as EU institutions accommodate interests and lobbying, they are able to use the 'with the people' sort of legitimacy; additionally, because the EU-level administration promotes collective goods, it can be also seen as bearing a 'for the people' legitimacy. She also rightly stressed that it is too simplistic to oppose the national and the supranational levels in the name of a 'democratic deficit'; 'democratic deficits' clearly also abound at national level in most member states.

We will look briefly at this question from the angle of 'political communication'. Political communication (or 'spin', as it has now come to be named after the British experience) is part of modern politics. Yet the Blair experience in this domain (Barbier, 2007b) amply demonstrated that, despite all its advantages and functions, 'spin' was certainly an insufficient and inefficient method to convince voters on the long term. However, one of the main lessons the European Commission drew from the failures of the referendums in 2005 was that it had to upgrade its communication policy. As the Commission's communication read: "Last but not least, with only a few exceptions, public ownership of the Lisbon growth and jobs strategy falls short. Media coverage has also been fairly limited. We cannot yet say, therefore, that broad sections of the population have been made aware, let alone taken ownership, of the strategy. This points to the need for a dedicated communication strategy, making full use of economic analysis and showing how action will bring real benefits for individual citizens. Similarly, social partners, who have an important role to play both as participants in the process and as message multipliers, should become more actively involved in the governance process." (European Commission 2006:7). A similar theme has been hammered into the audiences addressed by President Barroso since 2005. Recently, he was telling a supposedly Eurosceptic audience at the British Liberal Party annual conference: "we collectively need to demonstrate more concretely the benefits that membership of the European Union brings"¹⁹.

Because of the absence of any electoral process, the Commission lacks the means to campaign for its policies. Because of the non-partisan stance it has to conform to for structural reasons, the 'political communication' route may appear as the easiest one for the Commission to try and enhance the legitimacy of its policies in the 'European public opinion'²⁰. How-

¹⁹ Speech 07/541, 17 September, 2007, Brighton.

²⁰ The very notion of an 'European public opinion' has to be documented empirically.

ever, this remains a very fragile method, as the Eurobarometer surveys, conducted for the Directorate-General for communication of the Commission demonstrate. Moreover, as the main influence of the EU-level remains in the ‘negative integration’ domain (the prevailing EU legal order, the ever increasing role for ECJ case-law and rulings, not to mention the predominant power of an independent European Central Bank), it is doubtful that enhanced political communication and spin will significantly alter the Commission’s problem of legitimacy. Indeed again, as the French debate about the so-called ‘Bolkenstein directive’ – a typical piece of negative integration legislation – has shown, very conflicting views exist across the European Union. One way of documenting this question is to sketch the attitudes of various actors and of voters.

The state of social Europe

Whereas within a particular polity, interest groups and citizens in general make frequent assessments and political judgments about social policies, things are quite different for the EU. At least three broad categories of actors can be roughly distinguished in this respect: EU-level politicians and elites; national politicians and elites; voters (national electorates). In the first category, which is very much influenced by mainstream economists and experts from various think-tanks, dissonant voices are rare (among them some trade unionists and a few think tanks), partisan values and options being blurred in the European parliament. Amongst this first category of actors, the mainstream view of the state of Social Europe today privileges a key question, i.e. the lack of aggregate economic performance, a situation explained by insufficient ‘structural reforms’. Economists A. Sapir and J. Pisani-Ferry are typical advocates of this appraisal. To them, the reason why the referendums in the Netherlands and France were met by a massive ‘No’ seems obvious: growth was insufficient. For Sapir (2005: 5), « poor economic performance of the Eurozone was one of the principal reasons for the No votes and the monetary union may not survive a prolonged period of economic difficulty ». For Jean Pisani-Ferry (2005: 21) « the referenda thus emphasise that Europe’s poor economic performance deeply undermines the very legitimacy of the EU ». Both agree upon a global negative assessment of the OMCs. For Pisani-Ferry « The Lisbon agenda has not delivered »; “the Lisbon coordination of labour market policies has not strongly affected national policies” (ibid: 21-25). A. Sapir (2005:12) is even more radical: OMCs are useless or even « probably an obstacle rather than a catalyst for reform » (2005: 12). True, left wing politicians and parties, for instance in the European Parliament, add important qualifications to this broad evaluation (for instance the Party of European Socialists stresses the importance of “smart growth”). However, the simplified message remains rather consensual. The EU-level elite also seems to share in the common conclusion that better political communication with the European citizens is needed. Finally, in its majority, it agrees upon the necessity of a renewed institutional framework which is deemed indispensable for increasing the effectiveness of European level governance.

When we come to the second group of actors, i.e. national politicians, parties and experts, differences of appreciations abound. Some differences may be explained by the particular moment or context within which appraisals are made. Rather often, national politicians also enjoy prominent positions within their country’s representation ‘in Brussels’. Yet, on the domestic scene, the dominant political evaluation of European social measures, initiatives, policies and programmes is always marked by the specific national context: politicians tend to indulge in ‘Brussels bashing’, putting the blame on ‘bureaucrats’; they are also very active in fighting for their countries’ interests while, globally, promoting more inter-governmentalism. Whereas some member states are certainly more prone to the promotion of ‘federalism’ than others, a common explanation of attitudes of national politicians vis-à-vis ‘Social Europe’ is

that, in their majority, they don't want to be seen as sharing their own national area of competence in this domain. Each within their own polity, and with varying partisan views, they present their voters with quite differentiated explanations for the limits of 'Social Europe', which, in their immense majority, they want to remain strictly circumscribed.

When, finally, we examine voters' views, the third category of actors, a considerable body of research about values and their link to welfare states exist, that I will be unable to do justice to here (see for instance, Larsen 2006a, 2006b; Van Oorschot 2007; Van Oorschot and Arts 2005, Goul Andersen, forthcoming; see also next section). Incidentally, this research tends to address and compare national situations, but seldom tackles the question of the EU-level social policy. For this reason, researchers are often obliged, for lack of other instruments to fall back on Eurobarometer data (Schmidt 2006: 172-178; Ferrera 2005; Barbier 2006), which are often rudimentary. We will only take here some examples of their uneasy use.

Apart from the fact that a clear approval by referendum was achieved for the project of a constitutional treaty in Spain and Luxembourg, while clear refusals were registered in France and the Netherlands, we have only limited knowledge about the role 'Social Europe' played in these outcomes. True, one can identify specific explanations for the rejection in the latter countries (Barbier 2006); however it is difficult to really find a clear pattern from the comparative Eurobarometer data. These show a great variation across member states (Schmidt 2006) but also sometimes very changing and volatile pictures. Table 1 displays the appraisal interviewees give as to how they value the role of the EU in the domain of "social policy".

Table 1 – Evaluating the role of the EU in employment and social policy (%)

Role of the EU in employment and social policy (EU15) [Eurobarometer June 2006, n.65]	2003	2006
Positive	50	54
Negative	27	27
Don't know	23	19

However mean figures mask considerable divergences, as table 2 illustrates for the year 2006. This diversity is such that in-depth research should be implemented to interpret these opinions.

Table 2 – Evaluating the role the EU plays in employment and social policy (Eurobarometer, June 2006)

Country	Denmark	France	Poland	UK	Germany	Italy	Sweden
Fairly and very positive role (5)	65	43	68	49	47	67	51

If we now take the case of the attitudes of French and Dutch interviewees with regard to the desirability of a constitution over the period before and after the referendums in their countries, we see that these opinions have been very unstable. Even at the time they voted « no » in their majority, Dutch and French citizens have always supported *the principle* of a constitution, but they have done so very diversely across time.

Table 3 – Support for a constitution (%)

Eurobarometer issue Question 30.5	62 December 2004	63 July 2005	64 December 2005	65 July 2006	66 December 2006
France	70	60	67	62	56
Pays-Bas	73	53	62	59	59

Moreover is difficult to use Eurobarometer data consistently over a given period because these are imperfectly available. While using them, one sometimes also meets surprises as to how some comments and questions can be deeply influenced by the Commission's political agenda. This is the case with the theme of 'flexicurity' which we briefly mentioned in the first part of this lecture.

Most probably because the European Commission wanted to promote 'flexicurity', a question was introduced (QC18) in the 65.3 issue of Eurobarometer (October 2006). According to the report, « five proposals » deemed to directly or indirectly correspond to various meanings of 'flexicurity' were submitted to interviewees in the member states. The five proposals are shown in the box below.

« Regular training improves one's job opportunities »
« Life time jobs with the same employer are a thing of the past »
« Being able to change easily from one job to another is a useful asset to help people find a job nowadays »
« Work contracts should become more flexible to encourage job creation »
« In (OUR COUNTRY) many people retire too early »

The most surprising aspect of the report lies in its conclusion (page 15). From the finding that each independent item in the box above was approved by a majority of interviewees (between 72% and 88%), the Communication Directorate-General concludes that « a large majority of citizens agree with all the proposals, and thus indirectly agree with the concept of 'flexicurity' ». This rather far-fetched conclusion shows the degree of politicization of the use of Eurobarometer data. As a consequence, one would conclude that these data can provide 'first-aid' material but when it comes to really explaining, we need more than just volatile results of such surveys and their discreetly politicized comments.

Looking for a sociological explanation of the limits of ‘Social Europe’

Why political cultures matter

During the period immediately following the referendums, officials in the European Commission’s DG Employment and Social Affairs were very pessimistic about their future role. When interviewed, some of them deplored the absence of a ‘roadmap’. Yet, from another point of view, activity rapidly went back to ‘normal business’, and, in 2006 the DG was eager to seize upon the question of ‘flexicurity’, with the help of some governments such as Denmark’s. Typically, the Commission’s investment in the ‘flexicurity’ theme vividly illustrates the nature of the OMCs and similar policies: they tend to coordinate ideas and words, but when it comes to compromises and real stakes, action takes place within national polities, and battles are fought in parties and national parliaments, according to rules long established *locally*. For instance, the very special ‘flexicurity’ balance Danes have achieved for the moment, and, obviously, over a long period of their history, has social roots in their particular coherence of institutions, values and adaptation to economic changes (Barbier 2007a, 2007d; Campbell *et al.* 2006). In any country, in France and the Netherlands for that matter, the balance between what is acceptable and desirable in terms of flexibility of labour and employment on one side, and what is seen as ‘necessary’ (normally expected) security on the other very much depends on social coherences built over years within polities: such preferences are obviously reinforced by institutions and their success in the regulation²¹ of societies. Hence, ‘flexicurity’, by principle, is a *national* question. In the French case, the ‘No’ vote assembled many sub-groups of the electorate and increased already existing polarisation between social groups; at the same time, the “social question” (“*le modèle social français*”) and its defence played a key role (Eurobarometer 2005a). Findings from French surveys are globally confirmed by Eurobarometer results: as many as 40% of voters rejected the constitutional project because they deemed it ‘too liberal’ and not ‘social’ enough²². This happened although voters were not particularly hostile to the French participation in the EU²³. In the Netherlands, reasons for voting ‘No’ were explained somewhat differently (Eurobarometer 2005b), and the main reason quoted in surveys was the fear of losing a larger part of the country’s sovereignty. But social protection (the ‘social model’) is at the heart of this sovereignty and “closure” (Ferrera 2005). ‘Europe’ tends to appear as a danger to protections, especially from the part of the sections of the working population most exposed to the negative consequences of flexibility. Even in countries often presented as the best performers in terms of economic success and welfare, voters are still very reluctant, in the UK (Eurobarometer 2005c: 11) and in the Scandinavian countries.

Ferrera (2005), building upon Rokkan’s analysis of the process of ‘mass democracy’ (see also Rokkan 1995) describes the historical process through which the building of social protection systems in Europe was intrinsically linked to the transformation of polities and the mass participation of citizens. Historians of immigration in Europe (Noiriel 2007, for the French case) have also shown that the emergence and orientation of early immigration policies, from the

²¹ *Regulation* is here in the sense of the process of making society’s functioning possible (systemic adaptation), not in the sense of legal regulation.

²² IPSOS-Le Figaro Survey (29 May 2005) and analysis (2 June 2005): www.ipsos.fr.

²³ The Eurobarometer n°64 survey (2005c, p. 12) showed that the share of French interviewees that considered Europe a good thing fell from 51 to 46% in the six months to the autumn of 2005 (in the n° 65 survey, the proportion increased slightly, and the figure was 52% in the n°67 survey (2007). However, on a longer term, it had been under 50% for the last five years.

1930's, were intimately linked to the access to work, to social protection linked to employment and to other citizenship rights. Hence the fundamental basis for 'social citizenship' is to be found within national communities and, in all the EU's member states, this item constitutes the main issue in today's electoral contests, apart from security and order issues. As Ferrera also notes (2005: 53-54), the social protection issue has always dealt with "social sharing" and redistributing resources within identifiable and closed communities. Principles of social justice are fundamentally at stake and these principles are not universal, they are built over time by each particular community.

Consequently, there should be no surprise when manifestations of the resistance of the 'national level' occur in the process of European integration. This resistance, noted by Ferrera (2005: 163), is not only an outcome of a deterministic propensity of states to fight for their own interests and bureaucratic power; it also has to do with culture and identities, with the substantial legitimacy of 'social justice choices' that voters accept or reject.

Hence, the essential reason why 'social Europe' has been so far unable to achieve most of its quasi-federal promises, and to go beyond essentially negative integration (especially implemented through the European Court of Justice) lies in a reality often downplayed by analysts: as social protection is one of the main – if not *the* main – stake of elections and of the legitimacy of European governments, its *explicit* fate is exclusively decided in national polities, according to rules, values and practices that are particular to each country, and that constitute as many 'political cultures' as the number of countries involved. At the same time, no European polity exists, and no European political culture either²⁴. If this analysis is true, the third stage of 'Social Europe' is bound to last for a very long time indeed and the coordination success achieved in the 90's could appear as difficult to go past.

To substantiate this affirmation, we need to identify more precisely the elements that constitute 'political cultures'. True, there exists a voluminous literature about this topic and it is beyond the reach of this lecture to grasp and survey it, notably because it joins so many different disciplinary approaches. This does not prevent us to achieve a clear working definition of what a political culture, belonging to a national polity, consists of.

To achieve this, we have first to be aware of numerous methodological difficulties and pitfalls that have already been identified by many scholars in the past (Rokkan 1995: 139; Ross 1997: 43, 65). One of the difficulties is to identify values and norms which are shared within a community, and which are coined in one particular language, with all its connotations shared by and available to native speakers²⁵. Here essentialist approaches abound (Barbier 2005b), which have already been extensively criticized (see the case of 'mental programming' of G. Hofstede 1980). One of the most extreme approaches is probably Huntington's (1997: 20-21) who, without providing clear empirical evidence, postulates that "culture and cultural identities, which at the broadest level are civilization identities, are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold war world" and that "People define themselves in terms of ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs and institutions. They

²⁴ As Shore (2000) showed, from an anthropological perspective, one can identify a political culture in the administration of the Commission, but it is more an 'organisational' (or 'corporate') than a 'political' culture in our view. Even this corporate culture however differs depending on the nationality of civil servants in the Commission.

²⁵ In federal countries, more than one language is used. However, politicians in federal elections are expected to at least deliver some speeches in the languages involved, however expert they are in languages which are not their native tongue, as the practice in Canada demonstrates.

identify with cultural groups: tribes, ethnic groups, religious communities, nations and, at the broadest level, civilizations. People use politics not just to advance their interest but also to define their identity. We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against". Inglehart (1999: 24) has rightly challenged Huntington's main limitations. Inglehart and his colleagues (1998), using the methodology of the European Values Survey have extended it to more than 43 countries across the world. However their approach to political values supposedly shared in a particular nation is indeed not without methodological flaws. For instance it postulates that the choice between freedom and equality can be measured by the same survey question across countries and interpreted without considering institutions and culture (Inglehart *et al.* 1998). Yet, values and norms are not really explainable without establishing their relation to practices and institutions. Additionally, the identification of values and norms by the way of questions asked from individuals miss the 'inter-subjective' dimension of 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983). Using one or a small number of questions addressed to individuals is not sufficient to identify different political cultures: one cannot just conclude from such comparative data, as Algan and Cahuc (2006) did, that Danes are more 'civic' than other nations²⁶, and for that matter abler to practice 'flexicurity'. Hence, the interpretation of answers from surveys have to be set into institutional and historical contexts, before being interpreted, as C.A. Larsen (2006a: 19-20; 2006b) for instance shows: the reason why huge differences exist between the respective prevalence of trust perceptions across countries should be seen in the context of different welfare regimes that, *inter alia*, determine the perception of the poor and the unemployed in such and such a country²⁷. When institutions and practices differ, perceptions also differ and become intimately linked to the political attitudes and values that prevail in a particular country. Such social trust cannot be grasped in *culturalist* terms, and it has to be interpreted in relation to the welfare institutions. In the same vein, Van Oorschot (2007: 6) and Van Oorschot and Arts (2005) have documented the high level of legitimacy of social protection institutions in many countries (including Belgium and the Netherlands), perceptions which are based both on self-interest and moral obligations.

Political cultures indeed matter, but their systems of values and norms are embedded gradually in the national history and co-exist with rules and institutions, that are constantly tested against practices. These configurations of values, practices and institutions which change slowly are tightly knit together. Political cultures play different roles, as Ross has observed (1997: 44-53): they frame the contexts in which politics occur; they link individual and collective identities; they define the boundaries between groups and their interaction; they provide a (cognitive and affective) framework for interpreting the actions and motives of others; and they provide resource for political mobilisation and organisation. Far from being based on univocal identities as the essentialists would have it, they are compatible with multiple individual identities, and they allow for internal differentiation, voice and dissent within the polity. They are certainly not pointing to a universal sharing of uniform values within the com-

²⁶ "If culture matters and has long lasting effects on civic attitudes, then this cannot be changed quickly by alterations to labour market institutions. The Danish flexicurity model cannot be implemented without specific actions aimed at changing civic attitudes." (2006:11).

²⁷ One question (World Value Survey) Larsen interprets is the following: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?", for two waves of the survey (early and late 1990's). To this question 58% and 67% respectively acquiesce, as against for instance 21 and 10% of Portuguese interviewees and 22 and 23% of French ones.

munity in question, as the variety of parties is an empirical proof in all countries²⁸. They certainly correspond to one (or one part) of the individual identities, individuals having many identities at the same time, and this empirical fact is essential for distinguishing the notion of political culture from the essentialist, culturalist, approach. Features of these cultures are linked to the remote past and amount to ‘cultural infrastructures’ (Ferrera 2005: 21, quoting Rokkan; see also Flora 1999 quoting Rokkan: 7).

The present member states in the EU have developed different political cultures in relation to their respective social protection systems. Collective decisions about these social protection programmes and systems are always specific to each of them, as are the dominant and consensual values and principles of social justice (however conflicting – see for instance Jørgensen 2002 on this). National polities allow for the exercise of legitimate competition among various positions, within legitimate processes which are always specific. Last but not least, in the overwhelming majority of cases – notwithstanding the exception of a few federal countries, these political processes are held in one common language, which also acts as the language of politics in general in the country. The role played by language, as an indispensable vehicle for politics in polities is too often downplayed (Sartori 1991; Barbier 2005b). And the diversity and specificity of political cultures act as a formidable obstacle on the route to homogenisation, and on the path to potential ‘sharing’ beyond the national boundaries of the systems. We think that this element provides the key explanation for the limited achievements of the social dimension of Europe.

Danish and French political cultures briefly compared

To briefly illustrate the importance of political cultures, let us sketch for instance important diverging elements contrasting the Danish and the French cases in the area of social policy today, abstaining from mentioning their long-term cultural and political legacies, corresponding to quite different manifestations of Rokkan’s “cleavages” (the church-state, territorial, workers-employers, and political cleavages).

The Danish system of social protection has roots going back to the late 19th, and it is marked by crucial compromises²⁹ passed by social actors and parties (the Danish term is *forlig*), with a clear cooperation between the state, the four main parties, and social partners for the implementation of *dominantly* (Beveridgean) universalistic social programmes. Denmark has a proportional representation system, and the important decisions about social protection are discussed across the board with all parties and with trade unions and business associations.

On the other hand, the French system – which also has roots in the late 19th with the invention of universalistic *assistance publique* – was based on Bismarckian fragmentation, with the constant presence of conflicts and the absence of cooperation between the state and the social partners: programmes are dominantly linked to various statuses of beneficiaries, and, even today, *exceptionally* universalistic. More often than not, social protection decisions are made by governments, without genuine consultation and negotiation with social partners which are, both on the side of employees and employers, deeply divided. France has a majoritarian system for political representation and its political culture generally views proportional representation as the recipe for chaos and non-decision, referring to the post-war Fourth Republic.

²⁸ This approach is for instance compatible with Bernstein’s documenting of a limited number of partisan cultures in a particular polity, in the case, the French one (1999).

²⁹ See the very comprehensive analysis in Campbell *et al.* 2006.

The guiding values shared in the Danish social protection are universalism and equality. On the opposite, corresponding values in France are solidarity and formal republican equality. To these corresponds the acceptance of levels of inequality greatly diverging between both countries (irrespective of party membership), in particular with regard to the status of the poor (Larsen 2006a) and the excluded. In Denmark, the excluded are seen in terms of '*marginalising*' whereas they are seen as excluded (*exclusion*) in France, which indeed corresponds to different elementary forms of poverty (Paugam 2005), to the point that 'precariousness' (*précarité*, in the French sense) has no meaning in Denmark (Barbier 2005c).

While the tradition of collaboration between employers and employees was in a way inaugurated in Denmark with the famous *septemberforliget*, and again later in the 1933 Kanslergade agreement, upholding the right of the employer to steer its company, and the cooperation between classes (agrarians, workers and capitalists), the doctrine of the French Socialist Party has still not been officially 'updated' vis-à-vis the Marxist tradition in 2007.

Very different values and attitudes in Denmark and France command the accepted formal attitudes vis-à-vis the immigrants in the area of social protection. This is exemplified in France by the symbolic controversial and protracted debate about the very legitimacy of ethnic statistics (taking into account the ethnic or cultural background of individuals): on the contrary, Denmark is quite happy to publish such statistics, classifying people according to their ancestry, with symbolic categories opposing 'ethnic' Danes (*Danske*) and Danes of other origins and their descendants (*efterkommere*), as well foreigners (*indvandrere*).

All these differences which leave conspicuous traces, as was briefly illustrated above, in the French and the Danish languages used in their respective political debates, play a key role for constituting different political cultures, associating practices (for instance the practice of compromise and proportional representation as against opposition, majoritarian rule and street demonstration), values (the principle of universalism as opposed to the principle of solidarity between different statuses), and institutions (the French fragmented '*Sécurité sociale*' as against the universal Danish '*velfærdsamfund*'; the various institutions regarding the respect of the principle of accountability widely different in both countries, as the role of parliament, etc.).

The sketchy comparison above is but one empirical example of the existence of configurations of political cultures that command the development, sustainability, resilience and reform of the social protection systems in EU member states. It provides a firm empirical basis for explaining why 'Social Europe' has so far achieved so little and will probably achieve little in the near future, when even the 'best' scenario envisaged by Ferrera, i.e., 'incremental social supra-nationalism' (2005: 248-249) would be an extremely lengthy, cumbersome and painful, if credible, perspective. Member states in the EU stick to their social protection systems, (what certain countries call 'social models') and will resist supra-nationalisation because of national boundaries, because of the language of their respective polities, their political cultures. As has been the case even at the peak of the 'golden age' of the OMCs, they will steadily try to convince other member states that their own is the best of systems.

Conclusion

Such empirical facts have consequences both for action and for research. We will leave aside the consequences for action: one indication only will be to stress that the issue of culture has never been really on the EU agenda; if advocates of a real ‘Social Europe’ are serious, they would probably be well inspired to look into the matter with attention. This applies in particular to the opponents of the ‘race to the bottom’ scenario (Kvist 2004). Despite the warnings sent by the Dutch and French referendums, politicians seem to keep thinking that ‘de-politicization’ could be a productive route, but this scenario, for instance recently again supported by the Commission’s former president R. Prodi, seems highly unrealistic³⁰. For social science research, the present reflection leads to stress that universalistic approaches – such as the rational choice perspective in political science and sociology, and the mainstream economics perspective – are definitely unable to grasp the sort of facts that we have described here.

Actually, the EU has never seriously addressed the question of cultures. Culture is often seen at the EU-level as ‘high culture’ and as a vague and distant pool of ancient symbols, while day-to-day manifestations of the specificities of politics in the different countries are ignored or pushed back because they are difficult to handle in a de-politicized context. The economic dimensions of cultures (the ‘knowledge economy’) are often referred to but in a universalistic manner, while languages, history and humanities are left aside. One of the policy areas where this ignorance is the most conspicuous is immigration policy where national conceptions are kept separated from one another and left to possible manipulation by key players within each polity. As there is no equivalent of a cross-European polity, the salience of national polities is here to stay, notably because politics imply discussion and conflict, and the casting of votes in favour of real politicians who speak a particular language, displaying seduction and craft, sometimes even charisma to convince people to prefer the politics and policies they propose in the name of nationally bounded justice and security.

A side effect of this structural situation which is bound to exist for a long time (although presumably not for eternity) is exemplified by the resurgence and development of nationalist and ethno-populist movements in the majority of the EU member states. Xenophobia of many hues not only applies to the fear of distant peoples and foreign religions, but also to the close neighbours, the basic culture of whom is known only superficially. Even highly Europeanized elites, experts, politicians, businessmen and academics do not attach much importance to the cultural question.

Hence, any new move forward towards positive integration in the area of politics is bound to be confronted with the inevitable hurdle of mass votes. Electorates will inevitably be difficult to convince of the fact that their national institutions and their national system of social protection are in danger, because of a possible race to the bottom. If Europeanized elites are in their majority convinced that common European institutions are useful to help them devise regulative policies at home, and that they can learn from other countries’ experience, their view on this has mainly remained instrumental. So far, they have ignored the importance of

³⁰ In an interview with the French daily *Le Monde* (March, 24, 2007), R. Prodi declared : “*Il n’y aura pas de progrès possible dans une Europe bloquée par des motifs de politique intérieure des divers pays*”, concluding that national politics should be separated strictly ; and “*Peut-être est il juste de vouloir bloquer la blessure du referendum par un autre referendum. Mais cela pourrait devenir risqué, si on a la même interférence de la politique intérieure que la dernière fois* », implying that the practice of referendums should be marginalised.

political cultures, national specific sets of values, institutions and practices, as key factors in legitimizing decisions. In political science as well as in sociology, despite the huge amount of research accumulated in the area of 'culture', it is certainly the case that more research is wanted to explore further the question only sketched here.

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